

JANUARY 6TH, 2019: EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

Isaiah 60:1-6 Ephesians 3:2-3a, 5-6 Matthew 2:1-12

Early Christian communities quickly realized they were in on a secret. Not only had they experienced the risen Jesus in their daily lives, but their encounter with him/her made them privy to something they'd never before noticed. The author of the letter to the Ephesians expresses their insight in classic terms: "Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel." What people of God once thought to be just the prerogative of Jews, they now understood to belong to everyone on the face of the earth. A tremendous eye-opener! "Things" could never be the same.

Of course, not everyone saw reality through such wide-open eyes. Many of their friends and neighbors still insisted some people were, by nature, better than others, just as they themselves once presumed they were superior to and more chosen than others. But because of their encounter with the risen Jesus, they gradually began to understand all people are chosen by God to carry out God's will.

This new way of looking at reality sprang from an insight that the risen Jesus they encountered was not a Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. They were coming into contact with a "new creation." Instead of limiting their experiences; the risen Jesus infinitely expanded them.

As we hear in our Third-Isaiah passage, the prophet believes Gentiles can receive the same perks as Jews, with one condition: they have to convert to Judaism. The non-Jewish nations and kings to whom the prophet refers, will first have to walk by Yahweh's light. They're not strictly going to be saved as Gentiles.

This flies in the face of today's magi narrative, as long as you don't make these travelers kings, and completely lose the message Matthew is trying to convey by inserting them into his infancy narrative. (A narrative, by the way, in which Joseph and Mary don't travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Matthew has no Roman census. He presumes the "Holy Family" already lives in Bethlehem.)

Matthew wants his Jewish-Christian community to reflect on who these unexpected Bethlehem visitors really are. They're not just Gentiles; they're Gentiles engaged in a profession - astrology - for which, according to Jewish law, they're to be summarily executed. Yet, though they discover Jesus through forbidden means - star gazing - they actually do something with their discovery. On the other hand, the Chosen People's experts, Herod's "chief priests and scribes," refuse to follow their own Scriptures, and travel the few miles from Jerusalem down to Bethlehem. They're employing acceptable, Jewish means to discover "the newborn king of the Jews," yet they never actually come face to face with him. Only the most unlikely people in the neighborhood pull off that feat.

Though I've never heard any commentator discuss the topic, it seems these astrologers continue to practice their astrology after they leave Bethlehem. Matthew simply says, "They departed for their country by another way." They didn't even have to convert to Christianity to have had an experience of Jesus!

The only thing necessary to experience Jesus is hidden away in one of their gifts: myrrh. Dr. Irvin Arkin, one of my St. Louis U. Profs, once asked, "What would go through your mind if someone gifts you with a bottle of embalming fluid for your birthday?" In Jesus' day and age, myrrh was usually employed for anointing the dead. The magi's gift of myrrh can only prefigure Jesus' death. That seems to be part of the secret we share. Jew or Gentile, if we expect to recognize the risen Jesus among us we must be willing to die to ourselves. If we don't, we're going to be following stars in vain for a long time.

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JANUARY 13TH, 2019: BAPTISM OF THE LORD

Isaiah 42:1-4, 6-7 Acts 10:34-38 Luke 3:15-16, 21-22

An event we now take for granted once created huge problems for the early church: Jesus' baptism. As we hear in today's Acts reading, biblical tradition made it the triggering device for Jesus' public ministry. Among other things, it shows the historical Jesus began that ministry as a disciple of John.

Yet first and second generation Christians are not only embarrassed about Jesus' baptism by John, some authors even refuse to mention it. The basic problem is a belief that superiors baptize inferiors. So if John baptizes Jesus, he must be superior to Jesus. That's exactly how disciples of John argued when they confronted disciples of Jesus, even two or three generations after the latter's death and resurrection.

Contrary to popular Christian belief, all the Baptizer's followers didn't just close up shop and become Jesus' followers after Herod had their mentor beheaded. A huge percentage continued to believe he was the Messiah. Neither his martyrdom nor Jesus' ministry altered their conviction of his uniqueness. (According to some scholars, disciples of John were still active more than four centuries after Jesus' historical ministry!) That controversy seems to have shaped today's gospel pericope.

Though the passage mentions Jesus' baptism, it's not as clearly stated as in the two earlier gospels, Mark and Matthew. Luke simply refers to it in a participial phrase ". . . and Jesus having also been baptized" More important, this brief mention is preceded by a couple of references – in John's own "Christianized" words – to Jesus' superiority. "I am baptizing you with water, but . . . I am not worthy to loosen the thongs of his sandals."

Yet it's significant that Luke copies Mark's insight that this event contains an annunciation to Jesus. Just as an angel had earlier announced to Mary that her son was to be a special person, so ". . . A voice came from heaven, 'You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.'" Most readers mistakenly presume the voice says, "This is my beloved Son," making it an annunciation to others. But according to this tradition, one of the reasons Jesus' baptism is significant comes from a belief that it was during this event that the gospel Jesus discovers who he is. The commitment contained in that ritual makes it essential to the person Jesus later becomes. Though embarrassing later, Jesus' baptism made sense when it originally happened.

It also makes sense to have today's first reading be Deutero-Isaiah's initial Song of the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. At first glance it has nothing to do with anyone's baptism, yet at second glance it has everything to do with Jesus' baptism.

The prophet is reflecting on the implications of responding to Yahweh's call. He never doubts God has called him to prophetic ministry. But he's to be a prophet like no prophet before him, certainly not a hellfire and brimstone preacher. "Not crying out, not shouting . . . a bruised reed he shall not break, and a smoldering wick he shall not quench" He quickly learns he's unique, with almost no role models on which to fall back.

The gospel Jesus fits into the same category. As a human being, he has no idea what Yahweh's calling him to become. His annunciation, like all biblical annunciations, was composed at the end, not the beginning, of his life. Though his baptism implies he's certain of his call, like all our biblical heroes, he puts no limits on his response. We presume Jesus spent a lifetime discovering to what precisely he'd been called.

Too bad Jesus' historical situation eventually created problems for those narrating his baptism. Reflecting on it might help us in creating our own personal annunciations.

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